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The Gumbo Cult

by Eugene Walter

I have always regarded gumbo as a special, indeed a ritual, dish, and since it is symbolic in my mind of my beloved Mobile, that silliest of towns on the Gulf Coast, I have always tended the gumbo cult, no matter where I've found myself.

Two snapshots will suffice to explain a little of my affection for my native city, first capital of the Louisiane, and port for the state of Alabama. Think about the carnival for an instant. Each *tableau roulant* takes a year to prepare: wooden substructure, chicken wire, papier mâché, paint, gold leaf. Maskers climb aboard in their satin costumes, the torchbearers line up on either side with their Roman fire and kerosene lamps, the mules in their white sheetings are harnessed and the floats lumber slowly through the town, each preceded by a band and a mounted marshall, tailed by gangs of little boys waving the burnt-down stumps of flares. The procession lasts perhaps two hours: a year to prepare then one brief and gorgeous apparition. The next day, it will be dismantled and next year's parade begun.

Second snapshot: once when a hurricane was due to hit Mobile (we have a big one every year that has a six in it: 1896, 1906, 1916, etc.). I drove about town with a musician named Catherine Ann Brahms-Middleton to see the boardings going up on shop windows, sandbags piled up, all that. In the middle of the downtown area is Bienville Square, named for one of the d'Iberville brothers who founded Mobile in the 1690's, and which has beds of azaleas and camellias under the oak trees. With a sky ominously ink-blue, and a rising wind, storm warnings flying in the port, here was a gardener with his hose, quietly watering the flowering shrubs, snipping off dead flowers and seemingly oblivious to the coming storm. See what I mean?

* * *

My grandmother was a tiny woman, somewhat *boulotte*, passionately interested in flowers. I really remember little about her, save her clanking amethyst beads and that she smelt good, a kind of lemon verbena smell. It was in her kitchen that I first saw gumbo prepared, at her table that I first ate it, and joined the gumbo cult for life. At that time there were still a few Indians living in the woods around Mobile, remnants

and revenants of those Five Civilized Tribes which had been moved west by the unfortunate action of the U.S. government. They were not at all redskins, but rather I would call them beige-skins, for they were pale crème-caramel in colour. A few old women, among these Indians, were boboshillies, and came to town once or twice a week with their herbs, barks, and remedies. The boboshilly who came to my grandmother was tall and thin, and wore a white muslin headcloth, almost like a turban. She was completely noiseless as she came and went with a market basket full of this and that: I remember bay leaves, bird's-eye pepper, and the important gumbo filé.

This filé is a preparation of dried ground sassafras leaves which have been pounded in a mortar, sifted through a hair sieve, and bottled. It is a thickening agent, and is used in many Southern variants of gumbo, jambalaya, etc. It is always added just before serving and is never (I said never, yes, I repeat, *never*) cooked. It is the ingredient usually missing in these dishes when they are prepared away from the South. Okra, another Southern speciality, is often used to impart to gumbos that special smoothness which is a kind of figured-bass accompaniment to the piquant spices employed. Okra is the seed-pod of a plant belonging to the mallow or hibiscus family: the rose-madder and marshmallow are its cousins. Sassafras is native, but okra came from the Sierra Leone, brought by slaves. Sometimes, to confuse things, the okra is called 'gumbo' (or 'gumbo plant') – both are African words. 'Gumbo' means 'everything together' and for example 'gumbo ya-ya' means 'everybody talking at once'. The most subtle gumbos employ both okra and filé. I think I need not add that these dishes rich in seafood and spices are both aphrodisiac and restorative. *Pourquoi pas?*

I remember one occasion when a grand or state gumbo was being prepared in my grandmother's kitchen. The boboshilly had come and gone, and my grandmother and two negro servants were busy washing and chopping and boiling. One was Rebecca who had been my father's nurse; the other was Estelle who was mine. It was a cloudy day, and at a given moment when thunder crashed and a downpour began, the yard man Edward came inside to sit in the corner by the stove and have a cup of coffee. Edward was a light brown, and very religious. In imitation of Old Testament prophets he wore long hair and a curly silken beard. I think his origins were either East African or Copt. I had

been given the task of picking pecans for pie and was sitting under the kitchen table, using a wooden box to work on.

Father Sidell from St. Joseph's church was coming to dinner, and this gumbo was to contain crab, shrimp, chicken. The crabs were banging about in a box under the sink, the lid held down by a brick.

Suddenly there was a huge crash of thunder, a blinding yellow-green light, and then a rose-coloured globe of fire rolled through the room. Lightning had struck the pecan tree growing in the back yard by the stable. Rebecca screamed, Estelle crossed herself, my Grandmother looked under the table and said, 'Are you there, humbug?' But then everybody began to laugh madly, and since I couldn't see what they were laughing about, I crawled out and stood up. The electricity had caused Edward's hair and beard to puff out in the most extraordinary way. His head had become an enormous puffball, like a human dandelion puff. He was quite confused and spluttering. The funny thing was, he couldn't make his hair and beard go down, they stayed puffed out the rest of the day. I had been afraid of Edward before this episode; afterward we became friends. He had saved tinfoil for seven years, and one day, on his way to the Marine Junk Company to sell this hoard, he brought it by on a coaster wagon. He had made a huge globe of it, about two feet in the axis. I can still see him pulling it down Conti Street, like somebody delivering a silver roc egg.

This is my Grandmother's state gumbo: first boil the shrimp.

CHEVRETTES BOUILLIES, the real way

50 fine shrimp, at least.
 1 big bunch of celery, or 2 small
 Few sprigs of thyme and parsley
 2 bay leaves, torn in half
 1 dozen allspice
 1 blade of mace
 6 cloves
 1 red pepper pod (*opened and seeds thrown away*)
 Dash cayenne
 3 black peppercorns, cracked.
 Scraped lemon peel, a little.
 Salt.

Use a large pot of water, put lots of salt. Chop up the celery and celery leaves, crack or break all the spices, throw all in. When the water has boiled a few minutes so as to take the flavor of the spices, throw in the shrimp and boil for ten minutes. Then set them aside to cool in this water. When cool, shell them. This is the only way. They come out tender and perfect. But they must cool in this water. Save the water.

Second step, boil the crabs. You'll want six or eight big ones; put them first into cold water, this cleans and kills them. Then plunge them into seasoned boiling water. When they are cool, pick them. Leave the claws intact however: each serving of this gumbo should have a good crab claw in it. Now the dish itself:

GUMBO OF CHEVRETTES AND CRABS

Medium-sized chicken, cut in pieces.

2 or 3 slices ham.

3 green peppers

2 stalks of celery

3 tomatoes

4 onions

2 cloves of garlic

Spices and aromatics

Butter or bacon drippings

2 quarts of stock.

Can tomato paste

Okra

Take two tablespoons of butter or bacon fat, melt it in an iron skillet, add two tablespoons of flour and make a roux. Roux is the basis of practically all Créole dishes. This is to give the gumbo a good colour. Stir the flour in the fat (always with a wooden spoon) until without any idea of burning it has achieved a rich dark brown. Add a small can of tomato paste and a cup of boiling water, stir well. Add bay leaves, thyme, tabasco, cayenne, cracked peppercorns, etc. Now transfer this mixture to a large deep pot and put to simmer, adding two quarts of stock or strained shrimp water, chopped peppers, celery, ham, tomatoes, etc. Put butter and finely-chopped garlic in skillet, then brown chicken and onions together. Throw in some stock and scrape up chicken drippings, add all this to main pot. Add okra after this has simmered an hour. Let

simmer another hour. Add salt to taste. Shortly before serving, put in shrimp, crab meat and crab claws, mix well. Five minutes before actually dishing up the gumbo, take a cup of liquid from the pot, add a tablespoon of gumbo filé, mix well and stir into pot. Served with boiled rice and hot buttered French bread. Serves about a dozen hungry people or maybe sixteen polite ones.

Well that gives you an idea, doesn't it? People are always asking me, what is gumbo? As you see, it's not a soup exactly, it's not a stew, not a ragoût, it's a — gumbo! It is as dark and as thick as river mud, unctuous, spicy, and satisfying.

Thackeray, when he came to New Orleans, decided he liked gumbo even better than the *bouillabaisse* he had hymned. Lafcadio Hearn, one of the more interesting 19th century exotics, who was born of mixed European parentage on a Greek island, lived long in New Orleans, though settling at last in Japan. He compiled a book of Créole recettes which appeared anonymously from the offices of *The New Orleans Times-Picayune*. He reported dozens of variants, among them:

SIMPLE OKRA GOMBO,

which reminds me, that although gumbo is now the universal spelling, old family manuscript cookbooks in the South spell it gombaud, goumbaud, gouumbo, etc., and one excellent cook but poor speller living near Vicksburg and its memories of the War, has jotted down in my notebook her formula for 'Shrimp gunboat'. Well, as I was saying,

SIMPLE OKRA GOMBO, reported by Lafcadio Hearn

'Chop a pound of beef and half a pound of veal brisket into squares an inch thick; slice three dozen okra pods, one onion, a pod of red pepper, and fry all together. When brown pour in half a gallon of water; add more as it boils away. Serve with rice as usual.'

MAIGRE OYSTER GOMBO, reported by Lafcadio Hearn

'Take 100 oysters with their juice, and one large onion; slice the onion into hot lard and fry it brown, adding when brown a tablespoon of flour and red pepper. When thick enough pour in the oysters. Boil together twenty minutes. Stir in a large spoonful of butter and one or two tablespoons of filée, then take the soup from the fire and serve with rice.'

Caution, honey, with that red pepper! He means a tablespoon of flour to which has been added a pinch of Cayenne. Here's a variant which I ate in Baldwin County in 1938. We had been to see the hermit who had built himself a large earthen dome. He was a follower of Tolstoy, and had ideas on vegetarianism, fireless cooking, and such. He was surrounded by sleek cats and copies of Parker's pamphlet, *Keep Close to the Ground*.

GUMBO Z'ÈBES FO' SPRINGTIME
(GOMBAUD AUX HERBES, as a spring tonic)

Boil up the bones and scraps of a chicken and make a fine broth; strain, put back on the fire and throw in: 2 stalks of celery chopped fine, leaves and all, bunch of parsley chopped fine, two bunches of turnip greens chopped; bunch of spinach chopped, bunch of mustard greens chopped; some cracked peppercorns, salt to taste, good dash of Tabasco. Let simmer two or three hours and serve with plain boiled rice.

* * *

The Aleutian Islands, of which the Andreanof Islands are a part, are quite grand and nutty. Nobody knows how many thousands of islands and islets make up this chain, since this is the part of the globe which is geologically the youngest, bearing out the contention that the moon was born of the Pacific Ocean. Earthquakes are daily, and some of these islands have the habit of sinking into the sea for unpredictable periods, then rising just as nonchalantly. There are no trees, only the thick wind-flattened tundra grass, which springs anew in May and June, dies down in September and never really decays, only adds another layer of squashy matted mess, out of which new stalks rise when the winter snow is melted. Spring lasts a week and consists of blankets of cream-coloured anemones everywhere.

It is without doubt the saddest landscape on earth, shrouded in fogs and snow. The wind called williwaw really does blow horizontally from the North Pole and one can lean into it, until one is walking almost horizontally. Since I came from Alabama and had never seen snow in my life, I was bewitched. But many of the soldiers found the absence of trees depressing. Some of them made a tree of wood, chicken wire, and burlap, and put a little fence around it, and a sign: *Aleutian National*

Forest. When the bulldozers were pushing earth and rock and ice to make an emergency landing strip on the island of Atka I realized with a jolt that it was All Too Much to Bear, quite odd. The mounds piled up by the bulldozer had grotesque shapes which seemed yearning to change into faces and figures. All these islands and their landscapes seemed stirring in their sleep. I always thought of the rock peak Tchelitchew designed for the ballet of *Apollon Musagète*: at the end, in the calm light, it is seen as the heroic head of a sleeping Apollo. But there was no calm light here: the sun showed itself, and then fitfully, only five times in the three years I spent in those islands. The ravens seemed always hovering on the brink of human speech, too. I fancied astonishing exchanges between them. Without effort the birds around the dugout where I worked had learned to say, 'Hello!' and 'Hi, Doc!' and 'F-you!' It is easy to understand how, as I strolled furred and booted along the black Bering sands with a pet caribou and two dogs, the ravens crying greetings and obscenities through the thickly-swirling snow, I might long for the reassurance of a good spicy gumbo and the conviviality it implies.

So I learned to cook in those islands, since the food in the Air Force mess was mostly inedible. By dint of much stealing, bargaining (an old *New Yorker* was worth two fresh eggs in the Navy area), and scrounging of various sorts, along with the providential appearance of occasional food packages from the States, I was able to supply, for my cronies sybarite like me, one or two interesting suppers a week. I had a friend who was a pilot making a regular run down the Aleutian chain, and he brought gin, Guerlain soap and other things I require to exist. I kept begging him to bring a can of okra, but he could never find it. I was longing to try a gumbo. I remember well the night he turned up with it. The snow was deep and the williwaw blowing. The runway had been cleared and I waited by the hangar with dogs and caribou. My friend when he arrived was frozen but smiling.

'You and your okra,' he said. 'You know what it's really called? Lady-fingers!'

But he had found a tin of it at Edmonton in the Alberta province of Canada. Well I never heard it called lady fingers before or since, lady-fingers in the South are a kind of spongy tea-cake in the shape that the French call *langues-de-chat*, but that's another history of *Charlotte russe*

and such. Anyway, the next day, caribou and dogs and I went to dig clams on the black shores of the Bering, and I made a gumbo of fresh clams, dried onion flakes, tomato paste, celery salt, lemon peel and the blessed okra alias lady fingers. It was somewhat ersatz; but we really enjoyed it.

* * *

One winter day in New York after the war, I felt a persistent, mystical, and not-to-be-denied hunger for a big bowl of gumbo. Now it's interesting that in New York one can find food of every country on earth, save the South. What is advertised as Southern fried chicken is usually an ancient fowl encased in a cement mixture and tormented in hot grease for a week. Biscuits à la New York are pure cannon wadding. Gumbo they've not even heard of. I lived on Ninth Street in the summer, because of a little garden back of the apartment, but when the steam heat turned on in October I always moved uptown to an unheated flat on Tenth Street for the winter. I hate steam heat; makes me think I have a brick on my head. It keeps me awake at night and I hear the spines of old leather books cracking open in the nasty smothery heat. *Crack!* There's Ovid. *Snap!* Oh, poor Beddoes! *Creak!* *Pop!* Alas, the little two-volume Herrick.

Later the composer Donald Ashwander from Alabama came to live in the same building on Tenth Street, and made his excellent corn bread—best baked in an iron skillet—but then I was quite alone in my nostalgia for Southern dishes. So I went over to the Bleecker Street market to look for okra and got nowhere. Later, on Third Avenue, while shopping for paprika bacon, I saw garlands of tiny okra festooning the window of a food shop run by an Armenian.

'I want some okra,' I began, but that wasn't the name he knew. When I pointed, he said, 'Oh, those are called Greek peppers.'

'But they're neither Greek nor peppers,' I protested, adding to myself, 'just like the Harmonious Blacksmith is neither harmonious nor blacksmith, like the City Center is neither city nor center, the Republican Party is neither republican nor party, and red sable brushes are made of squirrels' tails.' But I took home a garland of the precious pods, which had been strung on cotton thread and dried in the sun, and made a nice

CHICKEN-GUMBO

1 medium chicken, in pieces
 1 chorizo, or any small hot sausage
 2 slices ham
 2 large onions
 2 bunches celery
 1 green pepper
 1 pound okra
 1 big can tomatoes
 2 tablespoons bacon fat
 Parsley
 2 bay leaves, torn
 Tabasco, cracked peppercorns, cayenne.
 2¹/₂ quarts of broth or stock.

Clean and cut up chicken as for fricassee; dice ham and sausage; coarsely chop up onions, pepper, celery, parsley, okra. Melt shortening in a deep pan and cook chicken and ham and sausage to a golden brown, add onion, pepper, etc. and cook them also until browned. Put in tomatoes, bay leaf, cover and simmer for half an hour. Add stock, cover closely and simmer (never boil) about an hour and a half longer. Season highly and serve with rice.

★ ★ ★

When I went to live in Paris I went temporarily upon arriving to the Hôtel Helvétia in the rue de Tournon. It was run by a couple, M. et Mme. Jordan, he from the Jura, she Provençale. The woodwork in the entry hall was painted exactly the same colour as their yellow cat Nounouche who was perfectly camouflaged when he sat on the radiator. Since I never found anything resembling an apartment, I stayed on five years in the Helvétia, which was not without its charms, being a remodeled 18th century *hôtel particulier* kept well scrubbed and polished by the Jordans. The problem was in cooking, which was forbidden in the rooms. There was a marble-topped commode in my room and in it I hid a two-burner alcohol stove, pots and pans, tableware, etc. The iron

screen of an unused fireplace concealed my modest cellar. So rather elaborate dinner parties took place in a room not much larger than a refrigerator crate: each guest had to take away afterwards a neatly packaged bit of garbage, to prevent my culinary activities from being discovered, and to prevent mice. One Italian princess, unused to such procedures, managed to leave a trail of coffee grounds and langoustine shells from my third floor room to the street, but usually all went well and what with the Riesling cooled in an ice-filled bidet, and candles burning in ormolu-and-crystal candelabra, a small oasis was created against the dire Paris climate. The most memorable dinners centered around a chicken cooked in *vin jaune de Jura* for Jack and Gurney Campbell, a soup of leeks and langoustine for the Pakistani actress Roshann Dhunjibhoy and the Dutch photographer Otto van Noppen, and shrimp in a fondue sauce for a Finnish darling named Renata Vitzthum von Eckstädt. I'll tell you about all these plates another time. What I'm getting at, is that at a given moment gumbo was indicated, since I had three serious eaters coming to dinner: Sally Higginson, Theodora Keogh and Celestino Mendès-Sargo, all of whom had heard just about enough on the subject of gumbo and demanded to taste it. As usual, the quest for okra began. I hopped onto the 84 and rushed to Hédiard's, back of the Madeleine.

'Okra?' demanded the fat pink clerk in white apron. '*Qu'est-ce que, vous voulez dire?*' He proffered mangoes and loukoumia, but the magic pods were unknown to him. My gumbo dinner might never have taken place if I had not dined in a Greek restaurant with some African friends: the first plate we attacked was a mound of okra.

'Comment s'appelle ce plat exquis?' I asked cautiously.

'Ça? Mais, ce sont les bamias.'

'Ah, oui, bamias,' I replied knowingly. But I sought out the head chef to learn his source of supply. He confided that there was a grocery in the rue Hautefeuille with enormous supplies of tinned okra, or bamias. Next day, armed with string-bag and hope, I set out for the rue Hautefeuille, a narrow, short street off the Boulevard St. Germain. I entered a low dark *épicerie*, presided over by a child-murderer type and his vampire mother.

'Bamias,' I mumbled, receiving an uncomprehending glare in return. French politeness, you know.

‘Ainh?’ said Ma.

‘Bamias,’ I repeated, but then I saw them, rows of fat tins with baroque lithographs of the okra plant. I pointed an adamant, triumphant forefinger.

‘Ça?’ squeaked Ma.

‘Mais,’ glowered the child-murderer, ‘ce sont les cornes grecques.’

‘That which we call a rose . . .’ I muttered, and gave my order. Anyway, I had my okra and made for Sally, Theodora, and Celestino a

GUMBO, IMPROVISÉ, *dit DE PARIS*

*2 tablespoons butter
2 tablespoons flour
4 medium sized leeks
About a pound of shrimp
2 or 3 dozen mussels
Stalk of celery
Parsley
Thyme
8 langoustines
Bay leaf, cayenne, peppercorns, tabasco
4 tomatoes, quartered
1 large tin okra.*

Melt butter in casserole. When it starts to brown, add chopped leeks. Then stir in flour. Add parsley, thyme, chopped celery, etc. Cook for a minute. Add liquid from mussels (which have been scrubbed and opened) and about a quart and a splash of water. Add raw shrimp, langoustines, seasongings, salt to taste. Cover and simmer very gently for an hour and a half. Add okra. Add mussels and cook till they curl around edges. Remove from fire and add a nut of butter and dash of tabasco. Serve with plain boiled rice, French bread, dry white wine chilled. Follow with a garlicky green salad, fruit, coffee, and Cointreau.

★ ★ ★

When I moved to Rome to live in a tiny house with a pocket-handkerchief of terrace and garden at the top of 157 steps on a hillside, I

immediately had okra seeds fetched from America and lovingly tended the green seedlings in the center of a flower bed until a helpful gardener took them for weeds and snatched them out. I gave seeds to Italian farmers at Latina on the Pontine plain, and the plants flourished and bore but they picked the pods only when they were longer than the regulation inch-and-a-half, with the result that when cooked this okra had the texture and flavor of boiled tree-trunks. Italians are very suspicious of new dishes and tend to sabotage them. But down in Calabria, in the neighbourhood of what once was Sybaris, the okra is cultivated and employed in many a savoury country mess. They're called Greek peppers there. The okra is a staple of diet in Greece, under its name of bamia: it has other names African, Turkish, and Slavic, which I've not yet learned. But okra or lady-finger or bamia or Greek horn or Greek pepper or witch's finger or gumbo or African mallow or what you will, it's a delightful vegetable and will survive the conspiracy to consign it to oblivion: I've just searched the Oxford and the Larousse and find nothing under any of its names. Now it occurs to me that I have mentioned okra only in connection with gumbo: it has a fame and career in its own right. *If you have a little water boiling in a pot, with a bit of scraped lemon peel, 2 or 3 cracked peppercorns, and a pinch of sugar, you can toss in a peck or so of okra, cook about five minutes or until they are succulent and just right, then drain, salt, butter, and serve. One picks up each pod by the stem, eats all save this stem. Very fine. Here is Bugeye's famous dish:*

FRIED OKRA WITH GREEN TOMATO

Chop up about a pound and a half of okra, and one or two good-sized green tomatoes. Shake them all together with salt, pepper, half a cup of corn meal, in a paper bag. Fry slowly in three tablespoons of bacon fat until brown. Drain on absorbent paper and serve.

Even as I write this, Southern agents are planting okra in fields close to Paris and seedlings begun in a glass-house are just being set out in the fields of Worcestershire. Beverley Pepper has *thickets* of it near Rome, and the Burpee Seed Company now offers a variety called Louisiana Velvet which can be started outdoors in Maine in even the coldest Spring . . . So the gumbo may become international, since it's a pure

pleasure as well as being aphrodisiac and restorative. Best of all, it's a dish that must be lingered over, and we all know that the dinner-table is the sunburst from which ideas go orbiting.

Now a note, to show that gumbo is not just a New World upstart, but has classical antecedents. All round the Mediterranean there are local variants of the mixed dish of seafood and spices cooked dry or left soupy, served with or without rice. The *bouillabaisse Marseillaise*, the *paella*, the *risotto con gamberi*, the *pilaff*, the *zuppa di pesce* are cousins germane to the gumbo and all own common ancestors in the ancient Roman kitchen. If you look in the first-century *Art of Cooking* by Apicius, which survives with later fourth or fifth-century interpolations, you'll find Book IV devoted to dishes of many and mixed ingredients, including a section on *patinae iscium holerum pomorum* and one on *minutal de piscibus velesiciis*. The *patinam Apicianam sic facies* is nothing but a recette for gumbo with oil-cakes instead of rice as accompanient. The tradition of the spiced mixed dish comes to the Caribbean from the southern side of the Mediterranean with the slaves, from the northern shores of that Sea with colonists from Spain and France. Chicken, crustaceans, onion, bay laurel, pepper and okra are the basic ingredients. The ancient Romans made a kind of Worcestershire sauce called *liquamen* prepared from salted sun-dried fish steeped with wine and spices in an open jar for two or three months. In the Cr  ole gumbo the method of preparation and the combinations of elements provide the luscious aromatic not-too-salty flavor which is so satisfying.

The Greeks prepare excellent tinned okra which is available in any fancy food store; so do the Americans. There are good shrimp canned by both the Japanese and the Sicilians. Tabasco comes from New Iberia, Louisiana and is found everywhere. Gumbo fil   is a real problem: if you can't beg some off a Southern friend, why not send a postcard to the Chamber of Commerce in New Orleans? There's no excuse for lacking gumbo if you belong to the cult or even think you'd like to. An appetite for this dish has the quality described by M. de Saint-Just in the *Almanach des Gourmands* of 1807:

*C'est un plaisir; c'est le dernier qu'on quitte.
Est-il   tint? bient  t il r  usscrite.*

And that's the truth of the matter.